proximity

I have never had much reason to visit cemeteries. The people I've lost all have chosen to be cremated and have their ashes scattered. But recently I found myself standing in the hillside cemetery of Castiglione della Pescaia, a small Italian village on the Tuscan coast, at the grave of Italo Calvino. Each of Calvino's works have arrived in my life with uncanny timeliness and occupied me completely. He is the only writer I have come across who could inspire me to make this kind of pilgrimage.

There was one other car parked behind the cemetery when I arrived, but I was grateful to find there was no one in sight. The graves were densely packed, their headstones arranged at various angles according to the topography of the hillside. The sky was a cloudless blue. There was no shade. A slight breeze came up from the sea, but without leaves for it to pass through the cemetery was in near perfect silence. I felt very strongly that I was trespassing.

I wound my way carefully through the sloping terraces, reading every name, scanning the little portraits of the dead. I had seen a photo of Calvino's grave online and knew vaguely what I was looking for: a flat, nondescript gray slab set up

against a pale stucco wall, surrounded by soil rather than concrete. I found it in the last corner of the cemetery where I thought to look, in the highest terrace enclosed on three sides by the columbaria of local families. Calvino and his wife Esther were buried on a small mound at the edge of this terrace overlooking the rest of the cemetery. Beyond the low wall I had seen in the photo, the town of Castiglione della Pescaia tumbled away into the distance, where green and blue met in a wide, gentle arc. A bed of wildflowers grew around the edges of the grave, and visitors had left the couple a small pile of rocks, pens, letters, and ceramic sculptures. I had expected to feel some sort of heightened proximity to the great writer while standing a few feet above his physical remains. I felt instead that he was more absent from that place than anywhere else on Earth. Without spatial separation, all that remained was the tremulous line between life and death.

A week later, in Paris, I visited Montparnasse Cemetery. I had no particular agenda there. I was on my way to the other side of the Seine, and the most sensible route took me through the cemetery. The day of my visit was overcast and gloomy. Moss-covered trees stood solemn watch over the graves. The majority of the deceased at Montparnasse are set far back from the gravel lanes. Their jumbled headstones resemble a miniature metropolis. Memorials of varying sizes, ages, and degrees of lavishness are arranged inches apart from each other; the narrow trails of concrete that wind between them almost require tip-toeing to avoid stepping on the dead. Maps at the entryways of Montparnasse point visitors to some of France's most famous public figures and adoptees. Only the upper echelons are allowed prominent places along the avenues. The limited space makes it nearly impossible for average citizens to secure plots there, let alone easily accessible ones. Parisians who manage to claim a spot at Montparnasse or Père Lachaise, its counterpart to the east, may receive some attention in death by association with their prominent neighbors.

These famous cemeteries attract particular kinds of cultural tourists. There are completionists who traverse the cemetery with map or camera in hand, pausing for a moment to snap a picture at each significant grave before moving on. Even the most industrious of these visitors would need several hours to see every notable person interred in Montparnasse. I saw an Australian couple of this persuasion who seemed lost: "No, see, that's Éric Rohmer up there. We've already been this way." Then there are the pilgrims, as I had been at Castiglione, who come to see one or two people in particular. I noticed them scattered between the trees at Montparnasse, solitary figures with their heads bowed. From a respectful distance, I watched a young man sway in place for several

minutes in front of Julio Cortázar, chain-smoking and clutching a beer bottle. Occasionally, a pilgrim would bend to deposit an offering for the dead. In the Paris cemeteries, many visitors leave Métro stubs on the graves. I asked a local friend if this was so the dead could ride the Métro in the afterlife. No, they told me. It was a display of devotion from Parisians who had traveled from distant arrondissements, from the jurisdictions of other cemeteries, to be close to their beloved.

Sometimes you can deduce the proclivities of individual pilgrims by the objects they leave or the people they choose to honor. Near the fountain in the center of Montparnasse lies Jacques Chirac, the center-right, bureaucratic former President of France. In addition to some modest flower arrangements, someone had left him a sealed envelope with "Merci Jacques! Chirac Forever" written in curling blue script. Around the corner from Chirac, tucked between loose cigarettes, cabbages, and other mementos, there was an envelope with the same script on the grave of Serge Gainsbourg: "Merci Serge -- on t'aime."

The filmmakers Agnès Varda and Jacques Demy are buried together in Montparnasse. Their marble headstone is wreathed in ivy and adorned with the lipstick traces of dozens of kisses. I couldn't help but imagine the strange

sensations involved in bending awkwardly over a grave and touching your lips to cold stone. What were these visitors seeking? It seems absurd, almost pathological, to expect meaning to spring forth from the grave of a stranger.

In his essay *Light In Our Eyes*, Italo Calvino uses the history of optics to explore how the mind accesses abstract images. He writes that "Claude Lorrain painted with his back to the landscape, which he saw reflected in a little convex mirror, conjuring up effects of distant, hazy beauty. The pathos of distance thus comes into being..."

This "pathos of distance" proposes a layer of meaning and emotion accessible only from afar, when our perception is eroded by space or time. A painter might gaze at their subject from an oblique angle, an imposed distance, or through a pane of glass. Rather than record them on the spot, writers often choose to recall events from memory long after they take place. While this distance might be thought to distort or obscure the subject, both painter and writer make this choice in pursuit of a greater clarity. The painter looks to the horizon to find light in its purest form, where everything that might reflect or disperse it has fallen away. Writers wait to tell their story for months or years in order to follow all the threads of their research, but also to approach a sharper truth honed by hindsight. Friedrich Nietzsche uses the pathos of distance to describe a regrettable individualism in which nobility can only be conferred through separation from the masses. Calvino's description would seem to contradict this. Nietzsche advocates for a form of retreat, a distance made of contempt, whereas Calvino's painter imposes separation out of curiosity and a desire for intimacy with his subject. He creates distance as a means of crossing it.

If there is a pathos that accompanies distance, then surely there is an equal or greater pathos of proximity. The need for closeness is fundamental to human nature. Within that need is a conviction that physical proximity can allow us to collapse the vistas that confine our memories to the past or that separate us from one another. These are unreachable ideals, but we pursue them anyway.

In 1975, the French writer Georges Perec published *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, in which he spent three days observing Place Saint-Sulpice from seats at various cafés. He recorded only those elements of the scenery that would usually go unnoticed: buses, pigeons, the contents of shopping bags. Like Calvino, Perec was a member of the OuLiPo, a Paris-based group of writers and mathematicians who devised rigorous structures for new forms of literature. Perec's *Attempt*, ostensibly meant to magnify the microscopic events and textures of a particular Parisian square, reads

more like a disappearing act than a work of observation. Perec remains so static in comparison with the teeming square that he seems to dissolve. The specific spatial properties of Place Saint-Sulpice withdraw from view in favor of constant, chaotic motion. The only governing principle is the unceasing rhythm of time.

"There is an undertaker's van in front of the church.

A 96 goes by.

People are gathering in front of the church (for a funeral procession?)

An 87. A 70. A 63.

Rue Bonaparte, a cement mixer, orange.

A basset hound. A man with a bow tie. An 86.

The wind is making the leaves on the trees move.

A 70.

It is one fifty.

SNCF parcels service.

The people from the funeral procession have entered the church

Passage of a driving-school car, a 96, a 63, a florist's van, blue, which parks next to the undertaker's van and from which a funeral wreath is taken.

In splendid unity, the pigeons go round the square and return to settle on the district council building's gutter.

There are five taxis at the taxi stand.

An 87 goes by, a 63 goes by.

The Saint-Sulpice bell begins to ring (probably funeral chimes)

Three children taken to school. Another apple green 2CV.

Again the pigeons go round the square."

Amid the clamor of church bells and numbered buses, the author is nearly silent. Any interjection by Perec himself comes as a shock. When he does make his thoughts known, it's to question his project.

"There are only two mopeds still parked on the sidewalk in front of the café now: I didn't see the third one leave (it was a velosolex) (*Obvious limits to such an undertaking: even when my only goal is just to observe, I don't see what takes place a few meters from me. I don't notice, for example, that cars are parking*)."

As he comes as close as possible to "what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds," he also seeks to approach the ideal form of the attempt itself.

While in Paris, I took a detour through Place Saint-Sulpice to see if I might recognize something from *An Attempt*. To my surprise, the Café de la Mairie where Perec spent most of that weekend in 1974 was still there on the corner fifty years later. The neighborhood council building where the pigeons perched had survived as well. The view from the café was obstructed by a cluster of white tents for a book festival celebrating French publishing. No one was able to cross the square without vanishing into the enclosed space of the festival. All the visible activity now took place around the perimeter of the square. The buses, inhaling and exhaling new people in syncopated rhythm, still bore the same numbers as always.

My own attempts at proximity proved anticlimactic. After all, nothing in *An Attempt* conveys any personal association with that particular square. The action of the *Attempt* could have taken place anywhere. Rather than an intentional setting, Place Saint-Sulpice served as an accidental site from which Perec abandoned the locational in search of the universal. He seems to acknowledge this dissociation in the last pages of his book. "By looking at only a single detail, for example rue Férou, and for a sufficiently long period of time (one to two minutes), one can, without any difficulty, imagine that one is in Étampes or in Bourges, or even, moreover, in some part of Vienna (Austria) where I've never been."

What Perec was most concerned with in his *Attempt* was not any particular place, but rather the resonant effects produced by extreme proximity with his subject, like a conch shell pressed to the ear. But my detour through Place Saint-Sulpice only deepened my curiosity for the attraction certain locations can inspire. Specific waypoints are accumulated in the course of a lifetime, either through a long-term relationship with a location, or as the mark of a brief and sudden drama. Waypoints serve as navigational tools for the vast topographies of memory. Any location can be plotted on the axes they project. Wherever you are, you can imagine your position relative to the site of a transformative flash of inspiration, or to the place where you grew up. The past comes rushing up to meet the present in these locations.

I decided to visit the town of Castiglione della Pescaia not because Italo Calvino was buried there, but because he lived there with his family during the summer. He had a small house in a pine forest within walking distance from the hillside cemetery. The coastal portion of Tuscany is a popular vacation destination for middle-class Italians. The stone pine trees, also called umbrella or parasol pines, are among the area's most prominent natural features. They grow right up to the shore, their roots reaching out to the line where soil becomes sand. Cloud-like canopies fan out atop slender, curved trunks, casting dappled shade on the country lanes and beachfront boulevards. Calvino spent the last summers of his life among these trees. He wrote his final novel, *Mr. Palomar*, at his summer house, and much of the book was inspired by the house's natural setting, particularly its sprawling garden and the stretch of beach at the edge of the woods.

Calvino's house and its grounds appear briefly in a segment of the BBC's *Bookmark* program that aired a few months before his death in 1985. To my knowledge, it's the only recording of him speaking English. Calvino greets the host at the edge of his property, where dense undergrowth suddenly gives way to manicured grass. The bare pine trunks evoke a crowd of onlookers around the perimeter of the lawn. The pair sit and talk on a veranda under the shade of a sloping tile roof. Calvino appears uncomfortable and perhaps a little embarrassed by the interview. He sits hunched over the table, eyes lowered, fidgeting with his hands. He flips through his notebooks to show pages filled with diagrams and layers of tiny handwriting. At one point, Calvino gets up to find the manuscript for *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, and we get a brief glimpse inside the house. He climbs a wooden staircase built into the wall to what looks like a loft above the living room. At the end of the program they walk to the beach, where Calvino, now wearing a straw hat and large sunglasses, stands motionless at the water's edge and watches the waves. It's hard to tell if this was a natural impulse or a contrivance by the BBC, as the eponymous protagonist of *Mr. Palomar* begins the novel by staring at those same waves. Palomar is named after an astronomical observatory. He is a reserved and scrupulous man who seeks to understand his place in the world through obsessive observation of things close to him. He attempts to isolate a wave and hold it completely in his view before it crashes, converges with another, dissipates, and withdraws back into the Mediterranean.

The day I visited Calvino's grave, I had driven down from Turin in a rental car. My goal had been to see some smaller coastal towns that were inaccessible by bus or train, and to have to use my paltry Italian in places where no one would respond to me in English. This particular town and its

connection to Calvino had always been a source of curiosity, and since renting a car for even a short period was an irresponsible extravagance for me, I felt this was my only chance to visit.

The cheapest rental car I could find was an electric Fiat 500. Its tiny battery meant I had to stop every ninety minutes or so to recharge, whether I wanted to or not. A full charge took more than an hour, sometimes two. Available maps for public electric vehicle chargers in Italy range from spotty to wholly inaccurate. I would arrive in a little town after driving half an hour off course, my battery all but spent, only to find the charger inactive or nonexistent. One charger I found was in the front yard of a farmhouse and didn't seem public at all. Another was in the parking lot of a massive unfinished building on the outskirts of a village near Pisa. It seemed to have been intended as a multi-story office building or a factory, but it had been abandoned as soon as the concrete frame had been poured. It had no window panes, doors, or floors. The inside was tagged prodigiously with graffiti, and tall grass sprang up between broken bottles and upturned shopping carts.

I arrived at Castiglione della Pescaia in the early evening. I had a vague idea of where Calvino's house might have been, but I was unable to find any record of whether it was still

standing. Much of the pine forest where he lived is now occupied by a large campground, and I decided to spend the night there after driving down the hill from the cemetery. Upon checking in, guests receive a map showing distinct zones for tents, camper vans, larger mobile homes, and cabins, all laid out around a small clearing with restrooms, a snack bar, and a tiny market. It seemed most guests were staying for several days or even weeks at a time. Some of the cabins had porches where large families of several generations were eating outside. The section reserved for camper vans seemed to be occupied mostly by Swiss and Germans who had driven south in search of warm seas. I followed a path that led away from the campground into the woods, illustrated on the map by cartoon stone pines in a vast green terra incognita. The sun was low in the sky, and light fell like honey between the trees. I walked far enough that all I could hear were birds and insects. Lethargic gnats drew shapes in the air. The sea breeze carried no more sound than it had in the cemetery up on the hill. Finally the trail vanished. I scanned the arrangement of the tree trunks looking for any sign of a clearing now obscured by growth.

Back at the campground, I asked the teenagers working at the snack bar if they knew anything about the writer Italo Calvino living in a house in these woods. They looked at me blankly and shook their heads. One of them said they thought the public library in town might be named after him.

I decided to go for a swim before night fell. I wound my way through the pines until they thinned and disappeared, dark green canopies giving way to a clear pink sky. There was no one else on the beach. The sand was still warm from the afternoon. Only the slightest waves broke in hisses and whispers on the shore. The same setting appears in *Mr. Palomar*.

"When the sun begins to go down, its reflection takes form on the sea: from the horizon a dazzling patch extends all the way to the shore, composed of countless swaying glints; between one glint and the next, the opaque blue of the sea makes a dark network. The white boats, seen against the light, turn black, lose substance and bulk, as if they were consumed by that splendid speckling.

This is the hour when Mr. Palomar, belated by nature, takes his evening swim. He enters the sea, moves away from the shore; and the sun's reflection becomes a shining sword in the water stretching from the shore to him. Mr. Palomar swims in that sword, or, more precisely, that sword remains always before him; at every stroke of his, it retreats, and never allows him to overtake it."

I woke early the next morning, just after dawn, and drove my rental car into the center of town in search of a coffee and a charge. No cafés were open yet, but I found a charger in the town's main piazza, which was really just the intersection of its two largest streets. An estuary lined with fishing boats cut across one corner of the square. The small river that joined the Mediterranean there began at a spring in the hills near Siena, where Calvino died of an aneurysm at age 61.

As I set the Fiat up to charge, I noticed a white sign above a door on the corner opposite the estuary. It read "Biblioteca Communale Italo Calvino." I remembered the teenagers from the campground. It was the first concrete indication that collective memory of Calvino still survived in the town, that its connection with him might feel present and true to people who actually lived there. The library didn't open until long after I had to leave that day. But as far as I can tell, I didn't miss anything. There are no actual artifacts belonging to Calvino in the library that bears his name. I learned much later that his personal book collection and archives are housed in a dedicated room at the National Central Library of Rome, along with some furniture and artwork taken from the summer house I had been searching for.

I felt my phone ring as I returned to the car. I was excited to find it was a friend calling from home, someone I had thought about often on my trip, but whom I hadn't expected to hear from. I turned on my phone camera and walked her around the empty square. I showed her the shuttered library and the boats bobbing on the estuary. I told her all about the day before, the day she was still in. Six in the morning for me was nine o'clock the previous night in Los Angeles. It was the middle of summer, and the sun had just set for her. It had risen over the woods where I spent the night only minutes later. Two distant points were so close they could almost touch.